Farming, feasting, fasting : Life in a Naga village

Soon after one leaves the muddled town of Dimapur one begins the ascent up the winding roads through lush tropical forests. This is when you enter Kohima district, the traditional home of the Angami Nagas and the capital of the state of Nagaland. It is a region with a fascinating history. Some of it is much discussed, some yet to be told. After all, the region has gone through nearly two long centuries of conflicts where the people have encountered , to put it bluntly, the British, the Japanese and the Indian army, in that order. Three key cycles of conflicts that has left its marks on the people and society in ways that are still unfolding.

But am not going to talk of conflicts today. I am going to talk about the villages, the forests and especially the farms. The conflict after all is anchored around them ; the rocks, the trees, the streams bears its silent testimony. Nagas on their part have learnt to live with the memories with dignity and fortitude. An one old Naga proverb says, 'when a person feels sad and down, the skies become grey.' Thus life in a typical Naga village ,despite its share of sorrows and worries, is about celebrating little joys. Service in the church, football in the ground, farming in the fields and life goes on.

Into Mima, under the shadow of Mount Japfu

"The Naga villages are perched on the most inaccessible peaks of the mountains, from whence they can perceive and guard against danger. Their dwelling consist of extensive thatch houses from thirty to fifty feet long, resting on posts but almost on the ground, whole constructed in a solid and compact manner"- An early colonial account.

For the Nagas the village has been the centre of the universe. Angami areas were the first one's to come into colonial contact. Life was never to be the same again for the Angamis after British Captain Jenkins and Pamberton entered the Angami Naga territory in 1832 (soon after the treaty of Yandabo) with a group of 700 soldiers and 800 coolies, trying to establish road connections between plains of Assam and Imphal. The story of the punitive British expeditions and resistance offered by the villages subsequently became stuffs legends are made of. The Battle of Khonoma of 1880 in itself has become an episode provoking much fascination as well as historical interest.

My destination is Mima village. Its in the Jakhama block in Southern Angami hills, lying around fifteen kilometres southwards from Kohima town, off the NH-2 (earlier NH 39) that goes to Manipur. Nested in the the hills that borders between Kohima and Phek district Legend has it that it was set up by people who had in an ancient time came down from the Mao areas in present Manipur in search of better lands. Now a well

established village with over five hundred families with three ‘khels’. It is a picturesque Naga village in the shadow of Mount Japfu, the second highest mountain peak in the state (3048m). The major attraction of the peak is the famous Rhododendron tree which has the distinction of the worlds tallest Rhododendron tree as per the Guinness Book of World Records, which is about 130 feet tall with an 11 feet circumference.

Farming as an act of healing and bonding

“The whole village is astir

Men and women are striding out

Headed for the far-flung fields.

The woman rushes out to join them

Calling out to her husband,

‘Remember to bring the seeds'

He does not respond

But she knows he'll do as he is told.

The morning is over”

-Temsula Ao, The Village Morning.

Come morning and its time for people to heed for their farm land. For the Nagas, like many mountain folks, a walk to their fields is a long walk through ancient forests and time worn hills. It is also a time of social bondage, a time of catching up on the daily gossips and recent innuendos. Life in the mountain village is constructed around a collective living.

Viennese anthropologist Fürer-Haimedorf, who did some pioneering work in observing the gradual transformations amongst Nagas had noted back in 1930s, “the Naga is first and foremost an agriculturist.” The Angami are known for their terraced fields. There are three types of land which people here own. Individual terrace land for wet cultivation, Jhum land or land used for dry cultivation on the steep slopes using the slash and burn method of cultivation and the most important part is the reserve of clan and community forestlands, owned by every village.

Mima village practise a most sustainable forms of agricultural practices. There are not much of lift irrigation technology or jet pumps, no tractors and oxen. A farmer here uses only a spade to work in these fields. Simple, yet meticulous methods of land distribution and wise water management plan by farmers holds the innovative key. Split bamboo channels run through the fields and the water sources (natural springs) from the higher slopes provide adequate supply of water for the crops. A collective life means

mutual checks and balance too and thus there are strict rules followed by the farmers from every clan to keep the height of the water inlet at the same level for every terrace field so that there is no imbalance in the distribution of water. These are ancient rules followed through an ethical code of wisdom down the generations.

Traditional expertise, experiments with cropping patterns and collective community farming techniques forms the backbone of agriculture in the hills. One slope of terrace field can serve up to 10 families. During a good season, these fields can yield enough crop to sustain these families.

Rice being the staple diet for region paddy is grown as a primary crop in the terrace fields. The fields also have corn, sesame, millets and diverse types of vegetables and pulses as reserve crops in case paddy fails. Some crops, which are part of the first batch of the winter harvest are potato, Naga onion, pumpkin, tomato and mustard leaves. In these watery fields, one finds fish, snails and crabs that add protein to the diet.

Off late there is a lot of encouragement from the government for fish plantations in the paddy. It sure makes for a pretty picture, almost a poetic scene. Just imagine golden fishes swimming high up in the misty mountains amidst lush and thick tall paddy!

Villagers in Mima have avoided using high yielding varieties; GM and transgenic crops and chemical fertilisers. Instead producing diverse crops through sustainable practices. In a time and age where ‘organic’ and ‘green’ products are acquiring a fast recognition as essentials of ‘good living’ in our rapidly urbanising sensibilities, there are communities like these in India that still practise sustainable agriculture that remains to be recognised. Although, am not sure if this lack of ‘recognition’ is such a bad thing after all! At times indigenous responses to food security and health and climate calamities are perhaps best left alone.

A day in the farm is also about social bonding and often over delicious food. There’s something about a ‘farmer’s meal’ for a city bred like me and some of the tastiest meals I have ever tasted are the ones in the farms.

To be a woman in the hills : A life in paradox

My belief that women are the backbone of society grew stronger with many exposures to life in the mountains and countryside. The women in the Naga villages are simply made of fairy dust. Donning many a hats they work relentlessly from dawn to dusk. Although where women are concerned, Nagaland is a place of contradictions. Naga women for centuries have cultivated land, raised families, woven cloth, provided food and marketed local produce and yet they do not have the right to inherit ancestral property. In the Naga hills dowry deaths or starvation deaths are unheard of and infanticide does not exist but at the same time women have minimal to nil representation in policy making bodies at all levels. It is good to see the new generation of the Nagas are speaking up on these age-old discrimination inscribed in community norms and practices. Changes are slowly but steadily taking place towards giving the Naga women the rightful place in the society where she contributes immensely.

The village remembers : A memorial for the brave and the fallen

An otherwise ordinary and pleasant walk down the mountains can turn into a lesson in history for some. It struck me hard on that fine summer morning, when I came across an imposing structure by the road side. It had a dignified but melancholy aura about it, sending off vibes of a past traumatised yet endearing. After all, it was a relic from a past the village folks of Mima and the Nagas in general are proud of, a pride layered with ample sorrow and poignance.

The picturesque village of Mima was intimately involved with the unfurling of the banner of Naga nationalism. Old people recall stories of Angami Zapu Phizo's long stays in the village and rounds of meetings around the fire place. Those were day days inn fifty's. Early days in the formation of Naga National Council (NNC). My favourite one is the story of Phizo's escape from an Indian army encirclement where the villagers took him out from right under the nose of Indian army by staging a mock funeral, Phizo being the deceased body inside the casket! A pale of gloom had had however hovered around these villages those years, villages after villages getting burnt by the army, sometimes even with people inside it. The village of Mima was burnt down twice in the decade of fifties and was rebuilt both times by the villagers with sheer grit and courage. Torture and death in the hand of armed forces, this was soon to become the common legacy for the Naga villages. With a twinge of sadness I realised, this indeed is many ways one thread that binds many of us in the region at large! An aspect on which villagers from Assam and Naga hills have lots to share.

The golden fields, they lay un reaped

As blood freely flowed

And mingled with the rains

And stained the virgin soil

Like a thousand scarlet sunsets

Back of the blue, blue hills.

Kelhoukevira,.Easterine Kire

Naga villages are living memorials of history, a history of courage, heroisms and tragedies. “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”, Czeck-French writer Milan Kundera writes. Naga villages have a lot to remember and a lot to remind us too. A visit to Mima and spending sometime there makes one realise that remembering can be an act of solitude too and a healing offered unto oneself. Many young people from villages like Mima are increasingly coming outside for jobs and education, seeking ‘a better future’. They carry a piece of the mountains and some shades of the green within themselves. The mountains remembers them too and waits for their return one day. Meanwhile life goes on in the mountain village like the reverberations of a tune centuries old.